

## The Hand that Held the Dagger 26 October

For a brief period in 1940, Italy under Benito Mussolini participated in the early phases of World War II in Western Europe. Italy had held itself apart as Germany began its campaigns of conquest, but, in June, after Germany had occupied most of France, Italy declared war against France, too. This led U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt to describe it as: “The hand that held the dagger has plunged it into the back of its neighbor.”

By autumn, Italy joined Germany in bombing Great Britain. The Germans had caused extensive death and damage in their raids over the British Isles, but Italy’s experience was not the same.

The first Italian air attack on Britain came late in the afternoon of October 29, as 16 bombers attacked a small coastal city. The attack caused some damage, but the British inflicted serious damage on five of the aircraft. The Italians had been flying out of an airfield in German-occupied Belgium.

British monitoring of Italian communications prior to each raid enabled the Royal Air Force (RAF) to deploy its forces in the best locations to fight the invaders.

By the end of November, with losses growing, and, more importantly, the need to support renewed Italian offensives in North Africa, the bombers were withdrawn from Belgium and redeployed. The Italians lost a total of 10 aircraft shot down in their short campaign over Britain, and a similar number damaged.

As the war progressed and the proverbial tide turned, British aircraft began bombing northern Italy. One of the leaders of the RAF women at the Kingsdown intercept base, who were monitoring the communications of Italian air defense forces, remembered distress among the Italian personnel; she recalled hearing voice messages such as “Casa ventuno a Casa ventidue. Rumore di velivoli. Otto. Otto. Cappa Cappa.” (“Casa 21 to Casa 22. Noise of aircraft at 8 o’clock. Over. Over.) She also remembered one of the intercept operators, whom she described

as having a “Neapolitan sing-song voice,” wandering around the Operations Room crooning, “Casa ventiquattro a Casa ventidue. Cappa. Cappa. Cappa.”